

# **Popular Culture and Current Affairs in the Early 21st Century (2000s & 2010s): My Perspective**

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## For more Princess's Spirit Ideas

There are more fiction and non-fiction titles by TaraElla relating to the Princess's Spirit concept.

TaraElla also maintains a blog and (upcoming) show inspired by the Princess's Spirit, called The TaraElla Show.

Visit **[www.taraella.com](http://www.taraella.com)** to find out more.

## Introduction

The main audience of this book are twofold: 1) those who want to get an idea of my perspective on contemporary events, the perspective underpinning my writing; and 2) future readers who want to know what this period was all about.

This book outlines some of the major events and cultural themes of the first two decades of the 21st century, that have affected my writing in the period, especially but not limited to the Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels.

Much of the content is taken from my other books. This is intended as a quick reference for those who do not wish to go through my other books.

Due to the nature of this book, the view is unavoidably subjective. My views represent a way of seeing things, living in the early 21st century. If you wish to see other viewpoints too, you can do so by searching for further information regarding the events and phenomenon I describe.

## **Disclaimer**

This book is based upon the personal experience of the author. Events are described as the author experienced them, and as she remembers them. The actual accuracy of events and dates in the book are not guaranteed in any way. However, if there is any error, it is unintended.

## **Chapter 1: Technology and Life in the Early 21st Century**

Technology had always played an important role in changing the world, fundamentally. It has changed the way people communicate, the way people understand things, the way people see the world, even the way wars are fought (read about how World War I was mostly fought if you are interested). It is also a source of hope, hope for a better future. Computer technology, the internet, and associated developments must be the most groundbreaking developments of all, in our times.

In the beginning, technology was simply either scary or exciting, in and of itself. Yes, there was a time when computers were indeed scary to many people. The 2006 hit *I Wish I Was a Punk Rocker* actually contained the line 'when

computers were still scary', referring to an earlier time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the average computer would have a black-and-white (or black-and-green) screen, and the user interface consisted of line after line of text appearing on the screen. The only way to control it would be via typed in commands, and you had to memorise those commands and get them exactly right, or the computer will refuse to perform the function. In those days, not all kids would learn how to use a computer, although I practically demanded my father to teach me back when I was seven.

But then it was about to get even better. In 1995 my family got a new computer with a coloured screen, which was also controlled by a mouse. For the first time you could actually draw pictures with the computer, and print out the resulting 'artwork' in colour. And in 1998, just before I started high school, we got the internet. Back then, internet speeds were really



slow, and the narrow bandwidth also meant that web pages had very basic designs with minimal graphics, and almost never had video content. And the computers themselves were now getting very exciting, simply because they kept developing at such a rapid pace. When I started high school, the average speed of a computer was 300MHz and they came with 32 or 64MB of memory, by the time I graduated (1.5 years early, keep in mind, so only about 4 years later), the best computers had more than 3GHz (i.e. 3000MHz) of speed and often had more than 1GB (i.e. 1024MB) of memory. That's more than 10 times in both measures! When I was in high school, exciting computer related news was almost an every week thing. The rapid development of computer technology coincided with the beginning of a 'new millennium', around the year 2000. Even when I was younger, there was much anticipation about what life beyond the year 2000 would look like. But with the rapid technological advances in the late 90s and talk of internet

speeds going up 30 times or more with 'broadband internet' coming soon to every household (it surely didn't disappoint when it did come to pass), this 'future anticipation' grew hotter and hotter. The year 2000 was the year of the '.com boom', where many people invested in technology stocks, almost certain that they would get huge returns one day. Of course that ended in the '.com bust' as any stock market bubble would have, but much of that investment actually did power future internet-based developments in hindsight.

With so much new technology, the next question was how we could use it. Unlike the television or cheap long-distance phone calls (the exciting things of my parents' generation), there was not ONE use for computers and the internet, but potentially MANY uses. In the early 2000s, this began to materialise, although still slowly initially. But in the later half of the 2000s, the internet developed many new

capabilities, and this opened up many great new opportunities.

Even in the 1990s, many people liked to create 'personal webpages'. Many websites, GeoCities being the most famous, provided an easy way for even computer novices to do so. Most of these websites went out of business by 2010, but they were an important part of internet history, and I would say, our collective cultural histories. When GeoCities finally shut down, there were even multiple attempts to create archives of the site, so what was on it would not be forever lost. Most 'personal webpages' were very simple, and looked rather ugly and bare by today's standards. They typically had a single-coloured background, a dozen or so low resolution photos, and text introducing the person in question to the world. Many were updated only sporadically, and often after a while their owners would simply get tired of updating and the page would remain the same

for years. By the early 2000s, it had become more popular to create 'blogs', or weblogs instead. The central difference was that a blog was designed to be updated with new posts regularly, and blogging sites made adding new posts easy. Most early blogs also looked similarly simple as personal webpages, and many such blogs also doubled as personal webpages. But at least, they are more likely to be updated regularly (although many owners still got tired of them eventually.)

But the advent of widespread broadband internet changed things. Sharing multimedia content like photos, music and videos had become much easier. The use of social networking sites, where people can connect with friends, share their 'status' and share multimedia content, reflected this new dynamic. Early personal webpages and blogs typically only had few photos, because uploading them was time consuming, and for

the readers, pages with many photos also took very long to load. But with broadband internet, whole photo albums can be both uploaded and downloaded within minutes. This became, arguably, the central activity of social networking sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, all which came of age in the 2000s. The increased bandwidth also meant that website design could be more complex, employing more graphics, thus showing more differentiation and 'personality'. Particularly in the case of MySpace, a social networking site which was the most popular such site during its peak in the mid-2000s, it was popular to decorate your profile page with 'themes' and other graphics that were freely offered at third party sites, making each profile look unique. At the time, many sites sprung up to offer such graphics specifically for use on MySpace, often making a handsome profit from the large number of visitors.

MySpace was also a popular place for independent musicians and artists to collect fans. As an independent musician just starting out back then, I appreciated the ease of just uploading my songs onto my MySpace profile, which made it available for both streaming and downloading to all my friends and anyone else who visited the profile. This may not seem like 'magic' anymore nowadays, but just a few years earlier, if you wanted to share your music on the internet, you had to find a site to host it, add the right players to your site, and fiddle with lots of code so that the players could find the right stuff to stream, all of which sounded really daunting even to this semi-geek. In contrast, MySpace offered a place where your music, your photos, and any band news could be easily accessed in one place, and it could be all set up in under an hour. Your fans could also send you messages or leave you comments through the MySpace page, saving even the need for a message board for some. Independent artists, who often do not have

access to huge sums of money to get a professional website created, now had a much more level playing field, when it comes to internet presence.

Social networking sites also allowed independent artists to get exposure they would not otherwise get. Recall earlier discussion where I reflected upon the fact that people generally had to learn about a TV show, a movie or a musician in traditional media before they would use the internet to find out more? Social networking changed this dynamic. Even if an independent artist had an official site, people who don't know them are not likely to visit that site. It is unlikely that people will stumble upon websites of people they don't know about randomly. An official website is therefore not a great tool to collect new audience. Your social networking profile, however, could be accessed by people visiting the site for other reasons, for example via a

general search of new friends or new music on the site. I know this because, during the era of MySpace for example, I got several times more hits to my MySpace profile than my official website. Some bands also liked to send random and unsolicited 'friend requests' to people, in order to get their attention and 'friendship'. This was a controversial practice, something that many other artists like myself didn't do, both because it was officially banned, and because most people find such requests an annoyance leading to a bad first impression. I also promptly deleted any such requests that came my way, as did many other people. The social networking site Facebook, which had overtaken MySpace to be the biggest such site by 2010, prevented such behaviour by actively prohibiting bulk, unsolicited friend requests. Instead, they provided an opportunity to advertise on the site to gain fans, or 'likes', at a cost which was relatively affordable. Thus Facebook turned out to be an even better opportunity for many independent artists.



Another social networking site that I did not first appreciate but have since found very useful is Twitter, a website that allows people to post updates, 140 characters at a time, and allows users to follow other users' updates. I originally found the 140 character limit frustrating, but it turned out to be a good way to keep fans and followers updated in a concise way.

Sharing music so easily was great, but sharing videos is even better. Even if you don't have an official music video, sharing your music with a lyrics video is, in my opinion, much more effective, and I always do it this way nowadays. The ability to easily share videos began with the launch of YouTube in 2005, and also other similar video sharing sites like Vimeo. Again, as with MySpace and Facebook, people can unintentionally stumble on your offerings at sites like YouTube and Vimeo, creating a further avenue to gain audience. Moreover, it has

become popular to do covers of currently popular music on YouTube. This is because nowadays many people search for and view official music videos on YouTube rather than on television (which caused a global decline in video countdown shows), and some may further explore the variety of covers that also come up in the search results. I have found many great talents this way, including many instances where I believed the cover to be clearly better than the original. Sometimes I feature some of these covers on my official blog, because I believe we should encourage independent talent and help level the playing field. Mainstream media won't feature these talents, so it's up to us independent commentators to do it.

The emergence of broadband internet and social networks were key to the rise of independent cultural artists, but it is important to note that other technological developments

also helped level the playing field further. These new technologies were originally conceived as ways to make life more convenient, and it was also for this reason that the technologies became widely embraced by the public. But, in my opinion, the most revolutionary aspect of these changes was that they enabled independent cultural artists with limited means to deliver their products on the same platform and in the same context as mass media backed players. This change is akin to the invention of large scale printing presses in its significance, in my opinion.

The first big change was the digitalisation of multimedia content. When I was very young, music and video always came in a physical format, to be bought in a physical store. Music came in cassette tapes and CDs, and videos came in large black VHS tapes. Anyone wanting to share their music and videos en mass would have to first produce these physical products en

mass, at a huge cost to themselves. And then they would have to approach stores to take their product and put it on the shelf. While the first step was already prohibitive for most people, the second step was even more prohibitive, as most video and music stores would only sell products sourced from major distributors. This was understandable, as shelf space was limited, but was also very unfair.

By the early 2000s, it was common for music and videos to be distributed as digital files. The MP3 format for music in particular became ubiquitous. Dedicated MP3 players and similar technologies like the Apple iPod further helped popularise digital music, because they were smaller and easier to carry around than portable CD players and a stack of CDs. This made mass distribution possible for the first time, for many artists. But still, in that age, not having a physical album for sale in record shops meant that you were 'taken less seriously' in

the eyes of some people. Moreover, a substantial portion of the population still were not familiar with accessing music and videos using new methods. Several more years later, things got better still for independent artists. By the early 2010s, paying for, downloading and listening to music digitally had become the new normal. Buying physical albums became the exception rather than the norm, so much that record stores began shutting down or changing their business model. As all music is now delivered in digital files, music from independent artists now have the same format, ease-of-use, and often similar quality to those from major labels.

The other big change was the popularisation of e-books. This happened slightly later than with digital music and videos, and the process appears to be still ongoing as of 2016. E-books were around even in the 1990s, but few people would bother to read them, as they could only

be read in front of a computer. But by around 2009, things began to change. The availability of portable e-book readers, either in the form of dedicated readers like the Amazon Kindle Reader, or in the form of tablet computers like the Apple iPad, encouraged people to start reading e-books. Of course, old habits die hard, and this change is bigger than switching from CDs to MP3s, and will take time. To this day, there are plenty of people who still insist on reading paperbacks. But more and more people are reading e-books. I have been publishing books in the e-book formats since 2006, and the past few years have definitely seen an increase in downloads.

The effect of a switch to e-books for independent authors is similar to the effect of a switch to digital music for independent musicians. As with records and video tapes, paperback books have to be printed at the author's own cost before being able to be

shared en mass. There is also limited shelf space in bookstores, and they typically reject products from independent authors. This is why, in the past, it was essential to have a contract with an established publisher if you wanted to be a serious writer. This is why, in the past, so many people who had stories to tell to the world never got the chance. E-books are therefore definitely a revolution that is happening around us right now, and not just for convenience or environmental friendliness.

## Chapter 2: Technology and Politics

As media changed, so did politics, both in its content and the way the 'game' was played. In fact, this is a core theme in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, set in the context of political events in the early 21st century.

Mass media outlets, including television, radio and newspapers, have long been the avenue through which large parts of the public came to understand what was going on politically. Unless you were a political insider, mass media was going to be how you got your political news, in the 20th century. The potential for these outlets to sway opinions and change minds, with implications for the democratic process, has long been recognised, used and feared. Television channels and newspapers have long had reputations of having political biases, despite their claims of being neutral and



fair, and the existence of an extensive catalogue of conservative leaning talk-back radio stations in countries like the US and Australia among others have greatly helped the conservative side of politics over the years.

But in the 21st century, mass media is no longer the sole source of information and influence in politics and election campaigns, and many people believe that, as the years have passed, their influence has waned. Taking their place are information sources in the 'new media', including internet news websites, blogs, and even simply informal social network based discussions between people.

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became one of the largest genre in blogging, both in

terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Bloggers who reported and commented on news events began to be described as 'citizen journalists', and many intellectuals began pondering on what effect this rise in 'citizen journalism' would have.

As with every major social change, there were people who welcomed it, and there were people who did not. Those with more positive attitudes were hopeful of a new era of richness of news sources, information and commentary and also the rise of prominent voices outside 'the establishment', and those with more negative attitudes were fearful of inaccuracies, misinformation and unprofessional conduct among citizen journalists. I believe that, as time went on, those with positive attitudes were generally proven right, and the negative aspects were uncommon enough not to be a major concern.

It has often been said that while traditional mass media 'broadcasts' stuff to its audience, on the internet we 'narrowcast'. This is because mass media typically feeds audiences of millions or more, all with diverse backgrounds and interests, in a one-size-fits-all manner. However, websites, blogs, internet video channels and the like are typically only viewed by people interested in them. Also, when watching television, often people would settle for watching something they just don't hate if there is nothing better on in other channels at the time. But with the internet, people surf away immediately if they lose interest. Therefore, many parts of the 'new media' are designed to actively capture the intense interest of niche populations. There are news and commentary websites specifically serving conservatives, liberals, libertarians, leftists, feminists and environmentalists, for example, and nowadays a lot of people would get most

of their news from such sites, something that would not have been the case even ten years ago. While the main negative effect seems to be the decline in circulation, and in some cases, the termination of many traditional printed newspapers, another effect is that many people only receive news and commentary from a point of view similar to theirs. This can potentially create an unhealthy echo-chamber effect.

On the other hand, the effects of a gradual move to narrowcasting are not all negative. Minority voices and concerns have historically been poorly served by mass media broadcasting, which has tended to ignore them in favour of narratives more comfortably received by the majority. The internet and the age of narrowcasting has allowed various niche minority groups to have their own voice, in a way that traditional broadcasting didn't allow. This has also allowed previously relatively

isolated individuals who share something in common to come together and have a shared culture, thus empowering them. The rapid empowerment of the LGBT community over the past two decades is, in my opinion, the best example of this. Furthermore, narrowcasting has allowed light to be shined on less mainstream opinions. For example, feminists news and commentary websites have allowed serious and popular discussion of feminist ideas well beyond academic and activist circles in a way that was never envisioned before, and the same thing has happened with the libertarian community. The recent rise of both feminism and libertarianism are thus, in my opinion, greatly enabled by the age of narrowcasting.

If the 2004 US elections were the first time mass media commentators started to notice blogs and 'citizen journalists', the 2008 US elections were the first time social networking played an important role. The internet and

social networks in particular played an important role in the early popularity of Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who would be elected president later that year. But this was only the start. Soon, it became inconceivable to run an election campaign without a social networking presence, especially on Facebook and Twitter, which would soon become the dominant social networks. Also importantly, it wasn't just political candidates and parties using social networks. There were also social network profiles for different causes, for example regarding marriage equality, or climate change action. People could receive news and share their opinions via these profiles, and also share news from the profiles with their own friends, spreading the word. As a result, many more people became politically passionate than ever before. This was especially true of the younger generation, who were the biggest users of social networks. It has been noted that the advantage of 'progressives' on the internet

probably outweigh the advantage  
'conservatives' have historically had with talk-  
back radio nowadays.

## Chapter 3: The 2003 War In Iraq

The anti-war movement was arguably at its greatest height during the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s. For the first time ever, young people bravely ignored the traditional expectation that to be patriotic one had to support their country's wars unconditionally, and championed peaceful alternatives. Ever since, it had become much more socially acceptable for a country's citizens to disagree with their government's decisions to wage overseas wars, while still being a true patriot. Indeed, some would argue that true patriots have the responsibility to voice their disagreements in this regard.

Then conscription was abolished, there weren't as many large scale unnecessary wars anymore, and the anti-war movement went quiet.



Until 2003. Described by critics even back then as 'the new Vietnam', and not even authorized by the United Nations, the US Bush Administration launched a war on Iraq, along with their allies, chiefly the Blair UK government and the Howard Australian government. Crowds of Americans, Britons and Australians filled the streets in protest, but these pleas were ignored by their leaders. Opinion polls showed that the UK and Australia in particular had large majorities against the war. Universities in these countries even had student strikes, just like back in Vietnam's days. Although conscription was now long gone, the idea of 'not in my name, not with my taxes' was passionately held by many people bitterly opposed to that war, my 16-year-old self included. Yet we could do nothing about it, just like Vietnam.

But there was indeed something citizens in those countries could have done -

retrospectively. The US and Australia had elections in 2004, and the UK had elections in 2005. All three governments could have been made to pay the price for the war. Yet none did, as all hung onto power safely. So firstly there was the despair that we could not stop our governments from waging an unnecessary war, then there was the despair that our fellow citizens wouldn't even punish the governments for doing so. For my part, 2004 was my first election, and I voted to punish Howard for the war. I did my part. I also vowed to always vote for my values above my economic interests unless those economic interests were my basic survival. If only more people would do that.

Our generation was not there for Vietnam, and luckily. None of us were conscripted by our governments to die overseas, and we have the Vietnam anti-war movement to thank for this. Yet, in those few months in the first half of 2003, I felt like just by telling everyone I was

against the war and signing petitions to that effect (yes, this part of Angelle's story in the Princess's Spirit Trilogy was inspired by my own), I shared something in common with past anti-war movements like Vietnam, especially since I was a university student too. I read up on the history of the Vietnam war and the anti-war movement, in the university library. I felt like the anti-war movement is a continuous ongoing struggle, and will be with us until governments stop waging unjust wars, and that I was doing my part, no matter how small it was. War will not be extinguished in one generation, but bit by bit, we will get there.

Fast forward to 2016. The British government has just released a report, the Chilcot report, concluding that the war was not adequately justified. Many of us feel vindicated. We were right. Upon the release of the report, Australian independent MP Andrew Wilkie called for Bush, Blair and Howard to be trialled at an

international court. It's something that I have been calling for, for 13 years. It doesn't look like happening anytime soon, unfortunately.

p.s. It has to be noted that, the war aside, I actually found Blair to be a reasonably good Prime Minister. Bush and Howard, on the other hand, I wouldn't have supported them even otherwise.

## Chapter 4: The Religious Awakening That Never Was

The 2004 US elections was famed for the rise of so-called 'values voters'. Such a voting bloc were identified when pollsters asked people what they based their votes upon. Those who answered 'moral values' or something similar were categorised as 'values voters'. In truth, I believe people should vote with their values rather than their economic interests, unless such economic interests have to do with their basic survival. But the 'values voters' described were overwhelmingly conservative and religious, and conservatively religious, and largely voted for Republican President George W. Bush. Let me explain in detail.

In the aftermath of the 2004 US elections, analysts pointed to the new voting bloc of 'values voters', who they believed were

ultimately crucial for carrying President Bush to his second term. The 'values voters' were generally conservative, religious people, and had issues of religious morality high up on their priority list, chiefly abortion and 'gay marriage'. In fact, it was common to describe the beliefs of this crowd as 'God, guns and gays'. Analysis found that this bloc represented up to a quarter of the voting population, and would surely have made a difference in otherwise close elections like 2004. They were also found to have a high rate of turning up to vote. However, this finding was probably confounded by the fact that there were same-sex marriage referenda running at the same time as the federal elections in most states during 2004. I will come back to this later. But at the time, several commentators even said that America was perhaps experiencing another 'Great Religious Awakening', akin to previous ones that had, for example, inspired the prohibition.

In light of this 'finding', there was a renewed focus on the role of conservative religion in politics. Everything from the way church groups would encourage their members to enrol to vote, to the way conservative talk-back radio and cable television was run, to the rise of new megachurches featuring pop music catering to young people, were analysed in detail. And it wasn't just in America. This widespread concern about the rise of the 'religious right' in politics was even felt in countries like Canada and Australia, where religion didn't traditionally influence politics, and religion was not thought to have affected the most recent elections.

As a young, committed libertarian-leaning liberal, I was of course horrified. While the young people I knew were not part of the 'religious right', media reports made it seem like that the 'religious right' were a large army, somewhere out there, ready to take over our culture. If even the 'adults' thought that it was

true, then it must be true. Decades of enlightenment were about to come face-to-face with a powerful force wanting to wipe it all away. On the other hand, I became very interested in the organisation of the 'religious right', and wished that liberal forces could be similarly well-organised. Analysis of the religious right also highlighted the fact that their relatively strong families, relatively clean living lifestyle and idealistic and ambitious army of young people was part of what made them strong. I was thus inspired to start encouraging fellow liberals to start embracing a cultural agenda of strong morals, inclusive family values, and ambition to improve the world. I had always believed in such values personally, but now I understood that it was important for my fellow liberals to embrace them too. If we didn't want big government conservatism to take over, we must first be morally strong ourselves. To this day, all this remains an important part of my cultural agenda. Great



Religious Awakening or not, these remain solid values for life.

But then, just a few years later, we started to find out that the Great Religious Awakening of the early 21st century probably just never was. The victory of Obama in 2008 was the first clue. Some commentators were prepared to say that the Republican Party would be kept in power by 'values voters' for a generation, but this surely didn't happen. As time went on, this was further confirmed. More and more celebrities came out in support of marriage equality. Surely that would mean the 'religious right' and their 'values' at least didn't have much clout among young people. By President Obama's second term, during which marriage equality support reached majority, it was clear that the Great Religious Awakening of 2004 simply never was. America, and indeed the rest of the Western world, was increasingly embracing marriage equality all this time, which was

incompatible with the picture of a rising religious right. It was a figment of the media's imagination. It just goes to show how we can collectively imagine and fear something that simply is not really happening.

But here's my theory for the whole phenomenon of the Great Religious Awakening that never was: Same-sex marriage, which wasn't even on most people's political radar in 2000, had emerged as a major election issue for the first time in 2004, due to decisions in its favour by the Massachusetts Supreme Court as well as several Canadian courts. Back then, not many people were passionate supporters of marriage equality, but many more were passionate opponents. The inclusion of ballot initiatives to 'ban gay marriage' naturally brought many opponents of marriage equality to the ballot box who wouldn't have otherwise voted, and most of this population was also likely to vote Republican, giving Bush an

advantage. This, however, did not mean the religious right was on the rise, per se. This was also not able to be repeated even in the 2006 mid-term elections, because even though the majority was still against same-sex marriage, the bans were already in place. Therefore, 'values voters' did not play much of a role in either 2006 or 2008. (The 2004 picture also could not happen in today's climate: the Irish referendum showed that, even where voting is voluntary, more supporters of marriage equality than opponents would turn up.) Meanwhile, there was also a concurrent same-sex marriage debate in Canada, and of course the religious right participated in politics over this issue. In Australia, it was probably more of a case of the progressives simply losing confidence and fearing for the worst, after four consecutive terms of conservative government and a recent defeat at the 1999 Republic Referendum. Note that this phenomenon was not observed in the UK or New Zealand at all, let alone Europe. If it had been real, it would

likely have spread to all countries of similar culture.

## Chapter 5: A New Feminism

Feminism has had a long (and proud) history of improving the lives of women. Once upon a time, women could not vote or receive equal education. First wave feminism changed that. Still, women did not have equal rights in employment, and many were fired upon marriage. Second wave feminism changed that. Third wave feminism then emphasized women's right to 'have it all' - a career and a family. Many modern women were living this dream, by the end of the 20th century.

For a while, it seemed that feminism had achieved everything and was ready to be historicised, at least in the West. I still remember a few newspaper articles from the mid-2000s, posing the question 'is feminism still relevant now?'. And they certainly had a point: many young women didn't feel that the

feminist struggle was relevant to their lives anymore, and many even refused to identify as feminist, due to the term's association with several radical figures in the 20th century. Feminism just wasn't on most people's cultural radar, male or female.

But by the early 2010s, feminism had another rebirth. Maybe it was the internet 'narrowcasting' culture enabling the rise of a new generation of feminist media. Maybe it was the inspiration of a new generation of feminist politicians, like US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Maybe it was the general renewed interest in civil rights. But things changed, bit by bit. At first, it was not very apparent. There were criticisms of popular culture figures being 'anti-feminist' every now and then. I remember singers and their lyrics being a popular target for this crowd, something I brushed aside as nonsense (I don't believe in political

correctness). A few years into this, I noticed that politicians and celebrities alike started to be regularly asked the question 'are you a feminist'. Most were quite non-committal about this in the early 2010s, but by the middle of the decade, firm responses in favour of feminism had become more common. Feminism has become a popular topic of conversation in the mainstream, in a way I have never seen before in my lifetime.

In general, I do welcome the rise of feminism, as part of the civil rights movement. However, I do have my concerns about respect for the freedom of conscience. For personal reasons, I just cannot bring myself to support affirmative action. I have come under fire from feminists for this. I have also found that the attitude that abortion is absolutely a woman's right and therefore doctors should not be able to refuse has become increasingly common. This is another view I cannot support, due to my

religious beliefs. While I welcome the new feminism, I also live in fear that it will exclude people like myself. I want to see women being equal as much as any other feminist, but I have other beliefs too. For my part, I use my blogs and opinion pieces to promote my own brand of feminism.

For all but two years during 2003-2016, I was a university student. This gave me another perspective on the rise of feminism. During the 2000s, it would be uncommon for students, male or female, to ever discuss feminism. I actually recall having ZERO discussion on the matter with my university colleagues during that time. Surely, it was a common topic for the student union publication to address, but it did not seem to be popular among everyday university students. Today, the situation is very different. Not only is feminism a popular topic of discussion across the board, the discussion is



often very in-depth, taking in issues such as intersectionality, privilege and trans feminism.

As with every rebirth of every movement, things are not always going to be the same as they were in the previous waves. The issue of trans inclusion is perhaps the biggest point of difference between today's young feminists and feminists of older generations. It used to be common among second wave feminists to exclude trans people or even put them up for ridicule, and other feminist were generally silent about this sort of behaviour back then. But in today's LGBT friendly world of progressive activism, this just cannot stand. Therefore, in recent years, young feminists have bravely taken up the cause of trans inclusion against their older sisters, and this has caused plenty of clashes. Today's young feminists are not afraid of controversy and will not bow down to injustice, even if it comes from 'feminist elders'. Another point of

difference is that men are allowed, indeed encouraged, to identify as feminists and do their part. In the past, men were often 'not allowed' to identify as feminists, simply because they were men and did not have the experience of women in society. But luckily, today's feminists have seen that the divisive approach is neither good for women nor for society in general. When Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came out as a feminist, many of my feminist friends cheered him on. More recently, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull saying that he, too, was a feminist was similarly welcomed by the feminist community. I see all of this as the necessary evolution of feminism into a more mature movement, growing up from an exclusive and divisive 'teenage phase' to a more wholesome 'young adult' phase.

## **Chapter 6: Civil Rights and Marriage Equality**

I believe the 2010s will be remembered as a great step forward for civil rights in general. The 2000s will likely not have such a great reputation, but in my opinion, it was where it all started. My view of this history is of course also the backbone of my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels.

Some background first. The 1980s and 1990s were more 'materialistic' decades, where, for many people, making money took priority over civil rights. In these decades, it was known that even many young people voted for conservative parties, for their perceived economic benefit. I have even heard of anecdotes from party volunteers at polling booths at US elections in the 1980s, where the

Democratic volunteers would dismay if young people turned up at a high rate.

Things started to change in the 2000s. In 2003, the War In Iraq inspired an anti-war protest movement, the size of which was not seen in decades. When, in 2016, a British government inquiry found against the justification of the war, many people who were bitterly opposed to the war, myself included, felt vindicated. In the 2004 US elections, while every age group above 30 clearly showed a majority voting Republican, a clear majority of under-30s voted Democratic. Some commentators pointed out to a new generation, 'generation Y' or the 'millennials', starting to enter the voting population meant that young people's priorities had changed. Others were even more optimistic, saying that in just one decade's time there would be much progress on issues such as marriage equality. They turned out to be right, even though in 2004 most people were

sceptical, seeing that more than 30 states had just voted to 'ban gay marriage'.

The effects of this change in priorities for younger voters continued to be felt throughout the next decade. In 2008, young people voted in huge numbers for Presidential candidate Barack Obama, first in Democratic primaries, then in the general election, pulling off a victory that seemed unlikely at both levels just one year previously. The chance to make history by electing the first black president was an attractive prospect for many, but even more attractive was his promise of 'hope and change'. By the 2010s, young voters' preoccupation with civil rights issues continued to change politics. By 2016, it was acknowledged by many commentators that the anti-marriage-equality Republican party now faced a demographic crisis in terms of votes, simply because it turned off too many young people and minorities. Meanwhile, in the

Australian election of the same year, a survey of young voters found that their top three priorities were asylum seeker rights, marriage equality and climate change action. Some commentators even argued that perhaps we cannot get young people to care about issues like the economy without first resolving the aforementioned issues.

The political landscape also appears to be undergoing a historic shift, with the 'left' becoming increasingly left on both social and economic issues. As of 2016, many observers have pointed out that the current platforms of the centre-left parties in the US, UK and Australia are the furthest to the left they had been for a while, perhaps since the rise of conservatism in the 1980s. On the other hand, libertarianism is increasingly replacing conservatism as the dominant ideology of young people on the right. For example, young supporters of right-wing parties generally have

no problem with marriage equality or racial issues, and the younger generation of pro-lifers often don't support actually making laws to punish abortion out of existence. This has not been picked up generally by the media yet, but I can sense that it is definitely happening in my generation. One of the main effects of this shift is that the younger generation is more anti-war than ever before. For example, when former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott tried to drum up patriotism and fear to use the 'ISIS and terrorism' issue to improve his poor position in the opinion polls, there was barely an effect. Commentators wondered why this 'old trick' no longer worked. But look closer at the age group breakdowns in the polls, and you will see that there was indeed a surge of support for the government among those over 60. It was just cancelled out by the massive drop in support in under-35s. Young people were turned off massively. This makes sense, as both new-left socialism and libertarianism are generally anti-war.

Looking back, many of the civil rights battles of the 2010s wave actually started in the 2000s or even the 1990s. Most symbolic of the new wave of civil rights struggle in the 2000s and the 2010s was the issue of marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. The issue first came to political prominence in 1993, when a lesbian couple sued in Hawaii for marriage-like benefits. However, in the 1990s, the vast majority of people were decidedly against the idea - an opinion poll in 1996 found only 17% support across the US. The Netherlands, on the other hand, soon became the first country to legalise marriage equality, which came into effect in 2001. By 2003-4, when the issue first received substantial political support in the English-speaking world, over 30% of the US, UK and Australia now supported marriage equality, but still, in November 2004, more than 30 US states simultaneously passed by referendum bans on state recognition of same-sex



marriages. 'Progressives' and 'conservatives' started to argue about the issue seriously, with the same old arguments to be repeated over and over again throughout the next decade and more. (I played my part by writing a book addressed specifically to conservatives and put the case for marriage equality by addressing every major conservative argument I could find.)

Early successes with marriage equality often came with fears the legislation may be overturned in the future, and same-sex couples either chose to marry at the first instance they are able to, or would rather wait until the legislation is settled. Canada passed marriage equality in 2005, but the Liberal government lost office soon after. Luckily, the next parliament attempted to re-open the issue but did not have enough numbers to do so. Similarly, there was concern about whether the election of a conservative government in Spain

in 2009 would lead to a re-examination of the issue. Luckily, this too had not come to pass. On the other hand, although the Californian Supreme Court legalised marriage equality in mid-2008, a referendum (the famous Proposition 8 or 'Prop 8') invalidated this by November. Existing marriages continued to be valid, but no more same-sex marriages could be performed until the ban was revoked by the US Supreme Court in 2013. I still remember the dismay at reading the news that Californian authorities had stopped issuing marriage licences to same-sex couples that day in early November 2008. On the other hand, the fact that this happened in California, centre of the global entertainment industry, meant that many celebrities came out in support of marriage equality and against 'Prop 8'. The high profile 'No H8' photography campaign, in which celebrities were photographed with their mouths taped as protest, even lasted for quite a few years.

As a new decade arrived, things began to look better. By 2012, both UK Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama had announced their support for marriage equality, although things would still take a few years to change on both sides of the Atlantic. On the other hand, many people were baffled by then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's unwillingness to support marriage equality, especially as she was an atheist and otherwise socially progressive. She later explained that she was affected by anti-marriage attitudes prevalent amongst 1980s feminists (she changed her position in 2015). Her explanation actually led to quite a few older-generation gay and lesbian people to come out and suggest that she had a point. I don't have figures to prove this, but in my own experience, marriage equality is a generational thing, and even young heterosexuals are actually more likely than older gay and lesbian

people to support and be passionate about marriage equality.

As time went on, the support for marriage equality continued to grow. Before 2012, the pro-equality side lost every referendum ever held on the subject. The November 2012 successes in Maryland and Washington state, both by 52-48, were groundbreaking enough. But the 2015 Irish referendum, with its 62% approval rate, surely was much better. By then, polls had also generally found majority support across the US. By 2016, polls in Northern Ireland and Australia, the only Western English-speaking countries to remain without marriage equality, found 70% support in each country (polls generally ceased to be conducted in the other countries after marriage equality was legalised). Furthermore, passion for the issue continues to grow, with a poll conducted during the 2016 Australian elections finding that 49% of Australians were 'strongly opposed to the

idea of marriage between only a man and a woman', making marriage equality the second most passionately supported election issue overall. This matches my own experience. For a decade, my passion for marriage equality was generally a thing my friends couldn't understand. They were generally fine with it, but couldn't understand the fuss. But more recently, I have met more and more people who are equally as passionate about this cause as I am.

## **Chapter 7: From Reality TV to YouTube Personalities**

The early years of the new millennium were the golden years for reality TV. The concept of reality television, in which every day, real life people are the stars of television shows rather than the same old cultural elites, was probably nothing new, but had only become a genre in and of itself during this period. Its impact on culture was massive. The popular novel series *The Hunger Games* was partially inspired by the genre. Even national elections have been compared to reality TV, although usually unflatteringly. Looking back, it appears this was a transitional phase, between a past when selected cultural elites dominated the cultural conversation, and a future where the culture and its creation are more thoroughly democratised. Reality television bridged that gap, and therefore deserves a special place in our cultural history, even though it did have

many critiques who essentially labelled it as rubbish.

Reality TV was big business at the turn of the millennium, and there were shows to cater to every competitive activity you can think of. The fact that many people (including myself) spent hours discussing yesterday's reality show(s) with friends, and the fact that you would commonly hear other people on the train or the bus talking about reality TV demonstrate their popularity during this period. Magazines would also commonly have reality TV 'specials', usually featuring profiles and interviews with contestants. The most popular shows included:

-The Big Brother series: two dozen or so contestants are pre-selected and placed in a house, where they have to live with each other as well as complete assigned tasks. The audience gets to vote to save or evict 'housemates' every week, and the last

remaining is the winner. It is pretty much a popularity contest.

- The Idol franchise: includes worldwide versions such as American Idol, Canadian Idol, Australian Idol, NZ Idol and Pop Idol (UK). It is essentially a singing competition, where the contestants first get quickly cut down to 12 or 13, then they perform songs of an assigned genre each week on stage. Each week, the contestant with the least votes is eliminated, until the grand final.

- The X-Factor, The Voice: also singing competitions, somewhat like Idol, but with also the involvement of 'coaches'.

- PopStars, Fame Academy (UK): other singing competitions

- The Amazing Race: where a dozen or so teams of two compete in a 'race around the world', visiting a different country and performing tasks related to that country's culture on each week of the show. There is no voting on this show; each week, the team that completed the



tasks last is usually eliminated, and the final three teams get to compete in the final week for the prize money.

- Masterchef: a cooking-based reality TV competition.

- Wipeout: a sports and action based reality TV competition.

- The Block (Australia): a renovation and interior design based reality TV competition.

The appeal of reality TV was multifold. Firstly, everyday people, not polished by the cultural elite, people with backgrounds similar to most of us, were the stars of the show. With every season of these shows, you get a brand new batch of these people, people who had never been on TV before. Shows like American Idol showcased their contestants' background and life extensively, and it was undoubtedly part of the appeal, for many people who had become

sick and tired of the fakeness of the cultural elites. Secondly, reality TV also sometimes included characters who were more 'special' than the cultural elite's conservative attitudes would embrace, for example people who were geeks, people who had unique beliefs, and people who were transgendered. Also, while TV was still king in the 2000s, the emerging internet technology had already begun changing things. People began demanding that they be able to connect with their favourite shows, musicians, celebrities and journalists like never before. Reality TV would benefit uniquely from this, due to both its characters being real, and its course being unscripted. The people discussing in the internet forums were a representation of the people who were going to vote to save or eliminate contestants, and thus shape the course of the show. To get an idea of how things are likely to proceed, the forums were where you went. With shows like Idol and Big Brother, forum discussions were not just sources for speculation about the

future, they were sources for educated guesses, which mostly turn out to be spot on.

Reality TV was also an important cultural game-changer for another reason: it showed that everyday people could acquire some of the 'characteristics' previously reserved for elite celebrities. People could look up to them, they could gain a following, and they could even participate in the cultural conversation. Many more traditional commentators lamented the loss of distinction between celebrities and everyday people, complaining how people were 'becoming famous for nothing'. The complaint that people were 'becoming famous for nothing' was probably, in some cases, related to the fact that some reality TV characters who didn't have the best talent nevertheless acquired huge followings. In the most extreme cases, this included for example *Idol* rejects who were shown the door at their audition, those who the judges didn't even let pass the

first gate. This infuriated many people time and again, for reasons I probably will never understand. People look up to others for different reasons, courage, uniqueness, and just being 'real' being several important reasons. People can be valuable for different reasons, and if you don't understand it, at least it's not your place to judge. I personally have cheered on many 'underdogs' in Idol over time, and whilst I recognised that there were probably other better singers, personality and other values also counted in my book. The fact that many others cheered for the same 'underdogs', often getting them into the top four, showed that many people saw the same things.

The popularity of reality TV appears to have somewhat decreased in recent years (mid 2010s). I guess in a world where the internet already offers many real-life personas, especially in the form of online video icons on sites like YouTube, there is now less need for

reality TV. For example, the proliferation of independent musicians on YouTube has reduced the need for a show like American Idol, which finally came to a close earlier this year (2016).

## **Chapter 8: Internet Based Activism**

From around the late 2000s onwards, it has been common to use the internet to engage in political activism. Common activities include:

-Sharing news and opinion: the internet is the most comprehensive and up-to-date source of news and opinion for a variety of activist causes. The narrowcasting nature of the internet also means that, for every major cause, there are dedicated websites and blogs to provide news and opinion. If your friend is also passionate about the same cause, you can also send them the link to any major news or interesting opinion.

-Signing online petitions: anyone can set up online petitions easily with several websites dedicated to this purpose. Alternatively,

petitions can be set up by activist groups or political parties. Signing a petition usually means leaving your name and email or phone number (as per the website's instructions), and the signatures are sometimes actually delivered to parliament or congress.

-Sharing social media content: social networks like Facebook and Twitter have a handy share function, and if you agree with something from a political page, you can share it on your timeline with your friends to show your support. Seeing your friends support something can be an encouragement for you to think about the issue too.

-Donating online: in the new era of politics, political parties and activist groups often use the internet to collect small amounts of donations (e.g. five dollars) because it's easy to donate this way using your credit card. In turn,

this convenience means a large number of people may end up donating, with their small sums adding to a substantial amount to spend on advertising.



## **Chapter 9: Music, TV and Movies in the 2000s and 2010s**

Popular music can either be said to have entered a new phase in the early 21st century. Or you can say that nothing much had happened in this period, depending on your perspective. The availability of digital music is the game changer here, either way.

The availability of digital music means that music never goes out of circulation. Unlike just two decades ago, nowadays you can download music from the 1960s, for example, if that is your taste. People are therefore no longer as confined to the music of their times as in other times in history. Moreover, the proliferation of independent artists, enabled by the digital music revolution, also allows a much broader range of tastes to be catered to.

Thus, there is no one single dominant style of music for these two decades. Electronic Dance Music (EDM) is probably the only 'new' genre to emerge in the 2010s, but even this has roots in techno and dance music of the 1990s and earlier. Otherwise, pop, rock, hip-hop and country continue to be the most popular genres of music, as in the 1980s and 1990s. Also, besides the increasing influence of EDM, there seem to be no reliable characteristics to differentiate music from the 1990s, 2000s or the 2010s. The 'market share' of each type of music on top 40 radio however seems to have varied slightly, for example there are definitely fewer love ballads on radio nowadays than in the 1990s.

As previously mentioned, reality TV is the main 'new' television genre in the 2000s, and its popularity continued into the 2010s, despite perhaps slightly declining. The other big change was that TV shows have become more likely to

showcase gay and lesbian characters and storylines. Shows like Modern Family and Glee are most famed for doing so (it is in fact the core of these shows), but many other shows have done so too. Such characters and storylines were very uncommon in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Regarding movies, the main change from previous decades was the introduction of 3D movies, where movie-goers wear 3D glasses and can see things in a slightly three-dimensional way. This became popular towards the end of the 2000s. Another development was the increasing number of movie series based on popular young adult book series, with the Harry Potter series (7 books about a wizarding school), the Twilight series (4 books about a vampire love story) and the Hunger Games series (3 books about a future dystopia) being the most popular among many more. In each case, the producers have decided to make

the last book into two movies, in order to extend the franchise for another year. It has been anecdotally claimed that these movies have encouraged young people to take up reading.

## **Chapter 10: Social Justice Warriors vs Libertarians**

The recent (mid 2010s) phenomenon of Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) has changed the cultural and political landscape dramatically. The term Social Justice Warrior only came into widespread use over the past few years. Sometimes it is used as a word of derision by their opponents, but often the term is used by the people described themselves. This term will be used here in a neutral sense.

Social Justice Warriors are people who take every opportunity to 'fight against' bigotry, including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination, usually but not limited to using their words online to shut down bigots. Engaging in wars of words with 'bigots' are their most common activity, and other common activities include

signing petitions (usually online), participating in demonstrations, petitioning for 'bigoted' people to be removed from positions of power, including both government and business positions, and sharing online posts that expose 'bigots'. Social Justice Warriors often have an attitude of looking for bigotry everywhere they go, and some people have observed that the commonly agreed-to 'taboos' in the Social Justice Warrior 'community' have increased over time. Social Justice Warriors, on the other hand, have claimed that various recent social changes, including the US Supreme Court's 2015 decision that all states must have marriage equality, and the recent rise in transgender awareness, is due to their efforts.

Against this backdrop, people who are against 'political correctness' have sought to fight back. Libertarians in particular have claimed that people have the right to freedom of conscience and speech, and SJWs are therefore wrong to

prevent this, something I generally agree with. However, internet sites and groups that claim to fight against the SJWs have often featured lots of casual racist, homophobic and transphobic speech. It seems that, to protect the right of freedom of speech, some people feel that they have to use it in a way contrary to what the SJWs want, to prove that they have succeeded. This, I really cannot agree with.

## Also from TaraElla...

### **3 Movements (Feminism, LGBT Rights, Marriage Equality), 2 Diaries, 1 Trans Woman's Message**

Natalie is a young trans woman living in the early 21st century. Her diaries chart both her own transition story, and the cultural and political events of the 2000s and 2010s in the US, UK and Australia. In the beginning, she had felt rejected by feminism all her life, and also decided to reject feminism. Feminism's complicated relationship with marriage equality, something she was passionate about, became yet another reason for her to reject feminism. However, as feminism changed, so did her perspective. Did Natalie ultimately decide to become a feminist? And if so, on what terms?

From the author: "I could have written a manifesto of inclusive feminism, but I know



that some of you would still be unconvinced. So instead here is a story, inspired by real life stories I have known. I am sure many of you will be convinced of the need for a more inclusive feminism after reading this.

While Natalie's story is fictional, the perspective taken on both being trans and the social and political movements of the 2000s and 2010s are inspired by real life accounts, and represent the very real perceptions of real people living today. Stories like Natalie's are out there everywhere, and if feminism is to be truly inclusive and effective, the messages contained in this book should be seriously considered."

## **Also from TaraElla...**

### **The Princess's Spirit Trilogy #1-3:**

#### **An Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Liberty Movement Story**

The early 21st century is a time of unprecedented opportunity for those coming of age. It is a time when many young adults set out to achieve their dreams, be it starting their own business, starting a political movement, or propelling themselves to superstardom.

Angelle's dream is to become Cultural Royalty of Pacificland, thus achieving what her mother couldn't. Her vision is based on freedom, dreams, love and fairness for all.

However, she soon finds that whilst change appears to be in the air, the resistance is often even greater. While the early 21st century is a time of opportunity for some, many people remain left behind, and tension and dissatisfaction is the order of the day in many areas of life. The increasing pitch of the culture

wars, and the influence of global movements from the Tea Party to the Occupy Protests, also combine to make Pacificland a daily ideological warzone. Meanwhile, Pacificland gets caught up in a meaningless political stalemate, with reforms like marriage equality stalled seemingly forever.

With her own dreams on the line, will Angelle stay true to her values? And if she does, will it be enough to make a positive difference? Life isn't meant to be easy, but are there rewards for the brave at the end?

## Also from TaraElla...

### **The Story of a 21st Century 'Somebody': Independent Culture Creation in the 2000s & 2010s**

For most of humanity, most people were destined to live and die anonymously. To be 'somebody' in this world, a somebody whose opinions would be heard in any way beyond close friends, was a privilege very few had enjoyed. In this environment, there would eventually be no point for most people to continue to think of themselves as a 'unique individual'. It surely looks amazing in hindsight, how far we have come in less than two decades.

This book is primarily about my journey to become a 'somebody' with something to say. Topics covered include how technology has enabled people like myself to have a voice,

what it feels like to join the cultural conversation and take cultural stances, and participating in politics and the 'culture wars' through citizen journalism. I will also examine the bigger cultural impacts of this democratization of culture creation.

Throughout this book, I will be telling my own story so far, as a cultural voice in this rapidly changing world. But I will also be illustrating the wider story of how profoundly the world changed, in these first two decades of the 21st century. The technology changed first, and that was groundbreaking enough, but I think that the greatest change was in the culture.